



The notion of the Butoh-body: defining paradoxical terms in artistic research

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Inter sections

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The notion of the Butoh-body: defining paradoxical terms in artistic research

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Seabed. Performance by Eleni Kolliopoulou. Magee Campus Ulster University. March 2018.

In this essay, I will introduce the theoretical background of the Butoh-body notion that informs my research. In doing so, I will offer a brief historical overview of Butoh dance and its contextualization. Also, I will refer to interdisciplinary artistic movements with similar qualities that share the same field of inquiry with Butoh. Finally, I will refer to the three major research iterations that forms the current project and bind them to this conceptual framework.

'Hijikata would often say something is Butoh-teki, Butoh-like. "Look, isn't he Butoh-teki?" he would say, or looking at a dog, "You see, this dog is Butoh!" He would find the essence of butoh even in non-human creatures including plants,' (Tanaka Min, cited in Cull, 2012: 112; cited in Caldwell, 2017: 4).

Keywords: Butoh, Performance, Basho, Life-death, Pure experience

1. Why Butoh

During the first stages of this research, as I defined my topic of exploration to be that of the body of the relationship, referring to the bond between our body and its surroundings, I went through the inquiry of disparate cultural practices and concepts which I considered relevant. The reason that I opted for the notion of Butoh body derives from the fact that it satisfies some characteristics pillars that suit to the practice-based nature of this artistic research. Firstly, Butoh stems from animistic ideals upon life, therefore deals with the abstract nature of the entities. This is a common ground in Fine Art practice where the human body is one of the rest of the volumes in the space and it is not addressed as a person (unless this is the case). Secondly, Butoh addresses the materiality of the body and reconnects it to a pre-subjective level of experience that unfolds in an unconscious, primal level. Furthermore, deploying visualisations is an open process that preserves individual interpretation, and therefore triggers creativity. Finally, the link between Butoh and natural sciences permits me to build and invoke to the audience a series of experiences that transcend narration and move beyond it into a level closer to mineralogy and ecology. This is an important step that allows a refined attunement that operates as a gate in the exploration of the body of the relationship.

In this respect, it would be useful offering a brief overview of the historical premises that allowed Butoh to flourish. B. Waychoff mentions that Butoh was created in late 50s by two dancers, T. Hijikata and K. Ohno 'as a reaction to the post-war climate and effects of the atomic bombs in Japan,' (Waychoff, 2009: 44). 'Butoh, bodies and being' (Waychoff, 2009) offers an overview of the birth of this contemporary Japanese dance form out of the mixing of Japanese theatre, Noh and Kabuki and merely as a response to them. Waychoff adds that according to Goodman's chronological study, Kabuki, (Japan's traditional form of theater) was based on Japanese religious spirituality and highly stylised. Kabuki's successor was the pre-war and post-war Shingeki (new theatre) led by Osanai Kaoru. Shinjeki in contrast with Kabuki, gave rise to a sense of interiority of the performers and was moved out of traditional religious spaces into public/ secular spaces.

According to Waychoff, 'young avant-gardes artists saw Shingeki as a negative move towards homogenization...as an institution to be transcended,' (Waychoff, 2009: 48). Therefore, Butoh, part of the Angura (underground) movement, from one hand refocused modern theatre on the body of the actor, and also recuperated shamanic properties characteristic of Kabuki. Jones (2012) refers to a similar trend in Europe and US in the same historical period. 'The emergence of the artist's body in the radicalizing 1960s is linked to the problems of subjectivity and sociality endemic to late "pan" capitalism...that demands that individuals 'submit' their bodies so that they can function more efficiently under its obsessively rational imperatives.' Hence, it was a broader sense of re-appropriation of one's self through regaining access to his/ her body that triggered the artistic movements of this period and spread cross-culturally.

K. Nanako, states that 'Hijikata created the term "ankoku butoh" (my note: dance of the darkness) to denote a cosmological dance which completely departed from existing dances and explored the darkest side of human nature,' (Nanako, 2000: 12). Therefore, Hijikata's research was in line with the demand of abolishing norms and imposed forms by institutional imperatives, therefore referring to the side of life that we choose to overlook and consider outrageous. That outrageous was simply 'the real, in a time when the body is constantly simulated' (Nanako, 2000: 25). Part of Hijikata's research had to do with dwelling in his 'childhood

experiences rather than techniques acquired later on, admitting that he had no master,' (Dind, 2016: 59). By sinking to his childhood, he was drawn to the bodily memory of being left for hours inside a hanging basket in the middle of the vast the rice fields of Akita while his parents were working as farmers. Hijikata is deeply connected to those primordial embodiments that will influence and form the realisation of Butoh dance as an anti-conceptual form. Fraleigh describes Hijikata's approach as 'a conscious effort to reconstruct a child's wisdom, a kind of innocence which children possess,' (Kasai, 2003: 6).

Butoh is concerned with an area of research upon the interiority and presence of the performer and this enables me to connect it with spatial practices in the contemporary scene. Iwana defines presence, 'as the demonstration of life's own original voices, which are forever being muted by society or institution, in contrast to expression,' (Iwana, 2002: 27). Iwana sees expression as, 'a product of the intellect... a way of being recognized by a society,' whereas he sees dancing solo as, 'the only true way of presenting the dancer's presence or directness.' Hence, he speaks about a dance that is connected to our 'original experience' and inner landscape (nikutai) as a state that is dormant in our bodies. Installation art on the other hand, has genuinely tried to encompass the above-mentioned qualities through spatial practices aiming to the activation of the awareness of the audience. So, we may assume that the nature of the research is similar, even if it is approached through different mediums.

Another aspect of Butoh that supports my consideration for the current research project is the intersection of different art forms, in particular, visual imagery and poetry. Hijikata developed a notation known as Butoh-fu that arrived to us under the form of scrapbooks that have been extensively studied by Kurt Wurmli (Fraleigh 2006). Wumli explains that within the scrapbooks, 'the eclectic assemblage of images in Hijikata's collection range from prehistoric cave paintings to twentieth century street graffiti, including works from all five continents,' (Wurmli, 2004: 7-8 cited by Fraleigh, 2006: 52). Furthermore, Fraleigh explains that Butoh-fu comprised both verbal and visual images for dance and was based on Hijikata's experiments on surrealist strategies. Butoh, could not be seen strictly as a dance form but as an art the embraces all senses and remains a source of inspiration for the visual and performing industry.

2. Butoh-sei, Butoh-tai

According to Caldwell (2017), in his written dissertation, *Butoh: Granting art status in an indefinable form*, Butoh is rhizomatic (under a Deleuzian reading). According to Deleuze (2004), a rhizome is somewhat like a DNA thus is not defined by its formal aspect but for an internal motor that actuates connections with disparate beings. 'The rhizome itself assumes very diverse forms, from ramified surface in all extension in all direction to concretion into bulbs and tubers,' (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004: 7). Caldwell compares "Butoh to its two most similar analogues, dance and performance art" and examines the way it 'resembles and differs from each of them.' He therefore points out 'how the reason categorizing Butoh as only one kind of art is problematic due to its being part of a non-Western aesthetic tradition that does not break the world up into such easily separable pieces.'

Caldwell is using Deleuze and Guattari's distinction between arborescent in reference to western thought and rhizomatic in reference to eastern. He states that Butoh, as 'the Rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo,' (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004: 27 quoted in Caldwell, 2017: 2). He explains this statement by reference to the

earliest Butoh works that involve film making and a variety of practices. Caldwell (2017: 5) highlights that 'there is a Butoh infused style of dance, which we call Butoh, Butoh itself is not the dance... Paintings too, are created by human beings and reveal their ultimate Butoh quality [Butoh-sei].' Therefore, my research will attempt to transfer the embodied knowledge from the dance seminars and the conceptual enrichment from the literature review upon the philosophical core concepts of Butoh into artistic practice outcomes that transcend the medium of dance and explore the body of the relationship.

Kasai (2002), in his attempt to grasp the essence of Butoh, identified a series of principles that have been mainly expressed by the Kyoto school and in particular from Nishida Kitaro. Nishida has been considered the more influential contemporary Japanese thinker who succeeds in bridging Western and Eastern thought. The principles that denote the Butoh body and inform the current research, are primarily related to the relationship of the body with its environment. This bond (performer's body and environment and hopefully audience's body and environment) is named Butoh-tai. Kasai explains the categories of mind body set regarding movements below:

1. The subject starts movements
2. The environment and/or internal mechanisms start the person's movements
3. Both the subject and the environment/internal mechanisms co-operate and start movements
4. The self and environment and the movements are not separated (my note: they constitute a circuit) (Kasai 2000: 4).

According to Kasai, the fourth category (Basho) is transcending the dichotomized relationship of the subject and object built upon an idea of human power over the environment that governs Western society. Hence, Basho is a particular way of experiencing Butoh-tai: being within, in synergy with the environment. Butoh-tai is then analyzed in its very principles that cover different strands of this relationship. From those principles (that circumscribe the same attitude), I am placing the concept of Basho, which was coined by Nishida on 1979, at the core of my research (Kasai, 2000: 5).

Kasai, in the same paper, mentions that Rolf Elberfeld, a German philosopher with specialization in Phenomenology, Sinology and the History of Religion, enumerated a series of keywords of Butoh (Kasai 2000). In my research in particular, I have been addressing the following ones through my research projects as follows:

1. I have explored Basho (the place) in Seabed whereby body and environment operate in synergy in a mutual ongoing relationship.
2. Life-death, or the constant flow of energy through transitional states was addressed in Waste-is-land.
3. Pure experience, that is Nishida's most fundamental way of experience was the research focus of Sky-field and Sky-field 2.



Waste-is-land. Performance by Eleni Kolliopoulou. Glass box, Belfast Campus Ulster University. April 2018 (above).



Sky-field 2. Performance by Eleni Kolliopoulou. Dark room, Belfast Campus Ulster University. February 2019 (above).

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